

# Gay City NEWS

"Abstraction Reconsidered"

July 26, 2007 by Frank Holliday

Two shows open now in Chelsea have similar concerns- abstraction, mainly in painting but also in a few drawings and sculptural pieces.

Abstraction, a dirty word for some time in the art world, emerges again about every 10 years and is reconsidered for about five minutes. Greenbergian Formalism, once the avant-garde of the New York School of painting, became anathema, and that perspective that became a springboard for the conceptual artist.

When baby boomers first came to New York to study art, Color Field, Hard-edge, and Post-painterly Abstraction were at the forefront and many were trained by their leading practitioners, learning formalistic strategies directly from the horses' mouths. Many learned the push pull theory directly from Hans Hoffman and color theory from Josef Albers and Color Field painting was born.

At the same time Pop Art, Minimalism, and performance art were fighting for dominance. Some things never change - the competition of figurative versus Pop versus abstraction versus photography versus any hybrid that implicates earlier lines or boundaries becomes an opportunity for exclusion. It often seems to boil down to tension between formal art issues and social concerns. And everything continually splinters, morphs, and reassigns signification, slowly moving art history and evolution along, as retrograde as it may appear.

Many young artists look back to movements that have died on the vine for their renewed exploration. Within these two shows - "Taking Shape" at Lennon Weinberg Gallery through September 15 and "Late Liberties" at John Connelly Presents through August 24 - a continuum of generations join together and an important branch of abstract painting ideas grows stronger.

In "Taking Shape," 11 artists are brought together because of their common bond of using pluristic shape as their figure-ground relationship. This is a strong show in which most of the works included have a masterful ease to them. In the work of Stephen Mueller, Billy Copley, and Stephen Westfall, many of the shapes are silhouetted references to things we may recognize, their forms simplified and idealized into flat shapes and patterns. In Beth Reisman's work, the palettes are bright and hue-conscious with the use of very pure color; the science of color is used to create vibrations. It's where form and color intersect that plastic tension results.

Paintings by Shirley Jaffe and Harriet Korman refer to movements as diverse as American Modernism, Cubism, and Hard-edge painting, with glances toward Picasso, Malevich, and Mondrian. Even Ellsworth Kelly can be seen.

It's a fine line that all these artists choose to walk. If one steers too near formal devices they risk emptiness and if one uses a formula so popular with art today - taking something formal and adding content - it become too obvious and trite. But if a balance is found on the edge between, exciting new spatial relationships and visual problems can spring forth.

In "Taking Liberties," 12 artists explore a wider range of painting ideas. Flatness of color and formal rules are explored in Kim Fisher's, Carrie Moyer's, and Michael Zahn's work, and looser methods of paint handling are embraced in the work of Daniel Hesidence, Elizabeth Neel, Dana Frankfort, and Augusto Arbizo. Fisher and **Wendy White** use combinations of paint application, sculptural elements, and shaped canvas to arrive at their formulas, while pattern or digital generations show up in work by Tauba Auerbach, Raha Raissnia, Alex Kwartler, and Jeff Elrod.

Earlier artist like Frank Stella, Peter Halley, Philip Taaffe, Kenneth Noland, Valerie Jaudon, and Peter Schuff are freely quoted. I always wondered when Neo-Geo would come back, but it makes sense that it would be a 20-year cycle. Many of these painters probably established their early art impressions during that period. These paintings have those roots, now forming the basis for elaboration.

The problem with some of the works in both shows is they seem to be corporate objects. They are smart, snappy, and decorative and look really good. But they only just create a facade, never breaking through fearlessly, risking it all in order to venture into new pictorial territory. There is a lot of playing it safe. Painted well with nice color and clean edges, they seem so consumer-friendly, Pottery Barnish. That bugs me. It looks a lot like "art."

Maybe paying back huge student loans and/or decorating rich people's homes lead to playing it safe. Or maybe there is nothing to risk anymore; we just need to entertain the status quo. Everything has an airtight explanation, a reason that is academically

correct.

Grads school ruins today's revolutionaries. Academics are so concerned with validating art as a science or a history lesson or a political tactic that very few great things are made, no mistakes are allowed, and there is no swimming in the unknown for extended periods of time in order to find something new.

Good is the enemy of great.

Painting is not very suited to today's pace. We live on quick fixes and instant consumerism. Painting takes a long time to harness before convention can be fearlessly thrown out and deeper, profoundly abandoned subjects can emerge.

The Lennon Weinberg show seems to embrace this problem; many of the artists have been painting for a long time. It feels oddly freer and yet solid, almost more radical, a position one would think the Connelly show would own.

So why does all this seem so conservative to me?

Maybe because it is. It looks good, smart, colorful, tasteful, explained, marketed, just like a glossy magazine ad. Maybe that's all art is now -corporate-friendly, consumer fashion, something to match the mid-century modernist furniture in the co-op. With everything so expensive today, I guess the object has become very important again.

Art is the signifier of hip, so perhaps money finally did win.

It sure looks like it did and I hope at least some of these artists are getting their fair share.